Educational practitioners, policymakers, and researchers continue to be interested in understanding the sources of student achievement. In these conversations, academic success and failure is attributed to a variety of factors such as socioeconomic class, family upbringing, a capitalist economic system, culture, hard work, motivation, intelligence, genetic predispositions, and effort, to name a few... This focus is evident in the burgeoning interest in self-regulated learning (SRL), which is self-steering process in which individuals target their cognitions, feelings, and actions, as well as features of the environment, in order to achieve their learning goals (Vassallo, 2013, p.1). In Self-Regulated Learning: An Application of Critical Psychology, Stephen Vassallo describes the many aspects of SRL from a critical educational psychological standpoint. Chapter 1 discusses, critical educational psychology (CEP), which “is a commitment to examine widely accepted ideas, concepts, beliefs, and methods in educational psychology through intra- and interdisciplinary perspectives in order to consider ways that the discourse of our field is implicated in the workings of power” (p. 19). Power is in turn implicated in issues of freedom, control, governance, oppression, discrimination, marginalization, empowerment, and disempowerment.
A brief background of SRL is provided in Chapter 2 and some critiques of SRL are presented in Chapter 3. Behaviorism was the philosophy of educational practices until the Enlightenment when awareness of self-control was connected to one’s learning. Self-regulated research is organized into two conceptual distinctions: constructivist and sociocultural. Individuals construct their own meanings, goals, and strategies, which are connected to sociocultural theory of historical contexts, social contexts, and the external environment demands for their learning. Students who are good at self-regulating their learning are said to have conditional knowledge, which means they have “self-knowledge and skills for task evaluation to decide on the appropriate strategy” (p. 46). Today’s pedagogical structure of teaching is set up largely to teach self-regulated learning to students by teacher’s modeling, direct instruction, facilitation, and dialogue. However, it is important that teachers use the appropriate interaction with their students in order to foster SRL. To develop SRL, students need to reflect and learn to control themselves by documenting thoughts and behaviors, measure their growth, determine environmental incidents, and be able to change personal and environmental variables. Yet when students are critiquing and evaluating themselves, there is research that shows self-scrutiny in the form of low esteem, stress, and isolation can develop, so it is important to have co-regulation, which entails students getting assistance from their teachers to evaluate their own learning.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Vassallo describes the significance of SRL in schools. “Neoliberalism is the belief that all economic and social arrangements operate best when structured as if there were a free market” (p. 85). “The neoliberal self is constructed in terms of human capital and is guided by an ethic of efficiency and productivity” (p. 85). Human capital is defined as an individual constituting his/her own source of earnings via schooling and training as his or her “investments.” In order for students to compete economically, they need to be proactive and reactive: proactively setting goals and evaluating tasks, while also being able to alter a plan by reacting to environmental consequences. Students need to not only foster being flexible, adaptable, autonomous, maintain high self-efficacy, and be efficient in achieving their desired goals but be able to use their interpersonal communication and management skills to achieve both personal and community goals. In order to fully utilize
SRL, a student needs to be realistic concerning his/her strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, thought processes, behaviors, desires, interests, and goals. Students using SRL are expected to study themselves to recognize their incompleteness and inadequacy in order to seek help to change the “empty self” into the “fulfilled self.” Because SRL is connected to empowerment, a student will gain a sense of agency as he or she is able actually to make choices that shape their life. SRL empowers students to use their agency where students’ are in charge of their own learning with conscious will and interaction with their environment. Vassallo suggests that Freire and Dewey would relate SRL to a humanistic view of empowering students, social emancipation, and social betterment. From such a point of view, SRL could be dehumanizing because students may tend toward self-interest as they pursue only their own personal desires. SRL is linked in some studies with helping generate student self-doubt, low esteem, stress, and isolation.

Since SRL structures of public school teaching, Vassallo argues that such teaching endorses guardian practices of middle-class children; “The form of guardian involvement and conditions of home environments that are identified as necessary to support SRL development resemble middle-class homes” (p. 113). In these middle-class homes (professionals, managers, and analysts), children have parents who will do homework with them and scaffold their learning. This interaction between middle class parent and child produces many skills that help in the acquisition of SRL. By contrast, working class parents often do not have the time to engage with their child’s homework or attend school functions and the like. In general, working class parents see school and home as being separate. Because working class children are not exposed to discussions to promote SRL at home and their parents’ employment structure often requires uncomplaining complicity to authority, this environment makes the children distrust and resist such authority, in whatever guise, which in turn often predisposes the children of such parents not to want to ask for help. Working class children are thus commonly at a disadvantage for gaining the needed skills to produce SRL. As a corrective, parents must learn to foster SRL at home by making special efforts to work on homework with their children and attend school activities when possible, and attempt to model their own SRL to their children.
The connection of SRL with the disempowerment of students is described in Chapter 6. SRL can empower students’ agency, but it also can encourage complicity, compliance, and obedience. SRL can disempower some students by encouraging mere compliance and internalized surveillance with the result that they merely replicate the existing social order of approved and normalized behaviors. Therefore, SRL can have an oppressive aspect where students become overly dependent on external sources of authority that encourage mere adaptation to the status quo, thus potentially implicating SRL with the neoliberal project of shaping the social environment. Vassallo states that Freire describes oppressors as those who deny the humanity of others and the oppressed as people whose humanity is denied. Freire’s caution is that there can be a hidden agenda regarding such phenomena as obedience, adaptation, prescription, and dependency. To guard against this possibility, if it is to be a positive influence on students’ learning, SRL must not be characterized by excessively self-interested goals.

Vassallo’s intent is to “provoke critical conversations that invite possibilities for researchers and practitioners to reject, embrace, or reflect on SRL” (pp. 163-164). The book starts with educational psychology and describes how SRL learning has become a part of the educational process and the pros and cons of using SRL. Vassallo presents a compelling and thought-provoking critique of SRL and poses questions that are hard to answer.

Although I would recommend *Self-regulated learning*, I caution the reader that it is a very difficult text, suitable mainly for graduate level courses. Nonetheless, educators at all levels—along with support staff and policymakers—could benefit from Vassallo’s analysis of how the incorporation of SRL into school pedagogy may be a hidden cause of some of our most intractable educational problems.
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